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ABSTRACT

This report is a review of the alternative education literature, which is scattered across three topic areas--dropout prevention, special education, and at-risk youth. Books and articles for this review were chosen to provide a view of the literature from the beginning of the modern alternative movement, generally considered to be the 1960s, to the present, and to show the progression of research and literature to the present day. Most of the sources are journals and books associated with documenting the alternative moment. In addition, sources from the Internet and research papers from accredited conferences were reviewed. The synthesis is organized into the following sections: the history and context of the alternative school movement; characteristics of specific populations in alternative schools; and the research examining outcomes for students in alternative schools and programs. Findings from the review indicate that while alternative began in the non-public educational arena, at this time they are most often found in the public school system. Alternatives are typically serving students who are at risk for school failure or are disenfranchised from the traditional school system. Findings on student academic outcomes are mixed. The synthesis concludes with implications for policy and practice. (Contains 74 references.) (CR)

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Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis

by

Cheryl M. Lange & Sandra J. Sletten

February 1, 2002

Prepared for:
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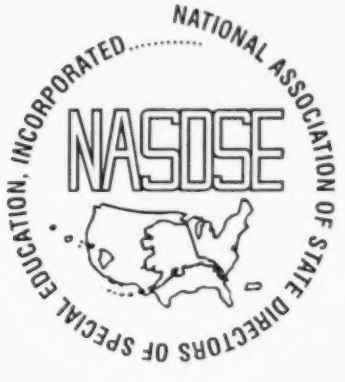

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Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis

By Cheryl M. Lange & Sandra J. Sletten

Introduction

The question of how to provide the best education for all of America's school children has compelled a vast array of educational research and experimentation throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As questions are debated, new policies and practices have been implemented and yet more questions emerge, resulting in new approaches to education. During the past two decades, in particular, reforms have flourished as the nation has called for high levels of accountability within the educational system. Public school choice, teacher preparation tests, graduation standards are among the many reforms or policies that have been implemented to enable students to reach their academic potential. Even with these changes, some students are not reaching the academic goals desired by parents, educators, and the public. The most recent evidence is provided by the National Center for Education Statistics and illustrates the continuing problem. "Five out of every 100 young adults enrolled in high school in October 1998 left school before October 1999 without successfully completing a high school program. This estimate was similar to those reported over the last 10 years, but lower than those reported in the early 1970s" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Through the past few decades, some educators and policymakers have contended that, if an alternate educational option is provided for students at risk of school failure, they will be able to succeed. Advocates argue that alternatives to the traditional school model are imperative to meeting the needs of all students (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernadez, 1989; Young, 1990). Charter schools and other public school choice models have been implemented in recent years to address the issue. However, alternative programs[1] have been in place for many years. They have evolved since the 1960s to the present day and currently are a popular educational alternative for many students across the country.

Raywid (1994) views alternative schools as a "cutting-edge" educational reform, even though they have been in the educational arena for decades.

> Amid all the current talk of school restructuring, alternatives are the clearest example we have of what a restructured school might look like. They represent our most definitive departure from the programmatic, organizational and behavioral regularities that inhibit school reform. Moreover, many of the reforms currently pursued in traditional schools—downsizing the high school, pursuing a focus or theme, students and teacher choice, making the school a community, empowering staff, active learner engagement, authentic assessment—are practices that alternative schools pioneered (p. 26).

[1] The terms "alternative school" and "alternative program" are used interchangeably throughout the literature and within this research synthesis.

While there is no precise accounting of alternative programs in the United States, some estimate that there are over 20,000 alternative schools and programs currently in operation (Barr & Parrett, 2001), most designed to reach students at risk for school failure. However, estimates vary depending upon the how alternative schools are defined. One reason for the widely varying estimates in the number of alternative schools is that there is not agreement across the educational community as to what constitutes an alternative school or program. The term may refer to schools of choice or schools where students are assigned. The various types of alternative schools are discussed in greater detail later in this document.

Though alternative programs and schools have been in existence for many years, there is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even an understanding of their characteristics; yet, many educators believe that alternative education is one important answer to meeting the needs of disenfranchised youth. Given the broad statements associated with alternative schools and the confusion around their definition and characteristics, it is important to examine the literature to determine what is known currently about this educational entity.

This report is a review of the alternative education literature, which is scattered across three topic areas—dropout prevention, special education and at-risk youth. Each of these areas provides insight into alternative education. Books and articles for this review were chosen to provide a view of the literature from the beginning of the modern alternative movement, generally considered to be the 1960s, to the present, and to show the progression of research and literature to the present day. Most of the sources are refereed journals and books associated with documenting the alternative movement. In addition, some sources from the Internet and research papers from accredited conferences were reviewed. Documents were chosen to represent both historical and current perspectives and research on the alternative school movement. In order to provide context for discussion of alternative education, the dropout, special education, and at-risk youth literature was chosen using similar criteria.

This research synthesis is organized into the following sections: the history and context of the alternative school movement; characteristics of specific populations in alternative schools; and the research examining outcomes for students in alternative schools and programs. The synthesis concludes with implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for further examination.

History and Context of Alternative Schools

Early History

Timothy Young (1990), in his description of the history of alternative schools, asserts that alternatives in public education have existed since the very birth of American education. He describes educational opportunities that differed based on race, gender and social class that set the stage for the constantly evolving nature of the educational system in America. Despite their origins in the earliest days of our country, alternatives, as we know them in the most modern sense, find their roots in the civil rights movement.

The mainstream public educational system of the late 1950s and early 1960s was highly criticized for being racist and exclusively designed for the success of the few. As Raywid (1981) describes it, these schools were "cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to the humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (p. 551). Critics of the public school system argued that the system defined excellence "solely in narrow cognitive terms at the expense of equity" (Young, 1990, p. 9). At the same time, America was declaring a war on poverty, and in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, President Johnson named the public school system as the front line of attack. The emphasis on excellence, Young says, was at this point replaced by the humanistic goal of equity. With government backing and funding, a new wave of alternatives was spawned that was meant to offer equal and meaningful education to disadvantaged and minority students. By the late sixties, the alternative movement had arguably split into two broad categories: alternatives outside of public education and those within the public school system.

Alternative Education Outside of the Public School System

Within the first category, alternatives outside of public education, two veins of reform typify the movement. One vein produced schools intended to provide high quality education to minorities in response to the substandard education they were afforded in the public system. These schools were generally referred to as *Freedom Schools*. They were developed as a community-school model and were run outside of the public education system in settings ranging from church basements to store fronts. Graubard (1972) describes the Freedom School movement as one where "groups of people sought control of the oppressive educational processes to which they and their children were being subjected" (p. 353). It was during this time that community control of education came to the forefront.

During this period, a second vein within the non-public education arena also defined itself in opposition to the existing educational system. Referred to as the *Free School Movement*, it was based on *individual* achievement and fulfillment, instead of emphasizing community. These schools were founded on the notion that mainstream public education was inhibiting and alienating to many students and that schools should be structured to allow students to freely explore their natural intellect and curiosity. A.S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill, a private alternative school and one of the most widely recognized of the Free Schools, was quoted as saying, "My view is that a child is innately wise and realistic, if left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing" (quoted in Young, 1990, p.10). Free Schools were intended to give children the freedom *to* learn and the freedom *from* restrictions. Several characteristics set Free Schools apart for this purpose.

- There was no required learning and no set discipline or controls imposed on students (natural consequences were assumed to prevail).
- The only moral value taught was that "everyone has an equal right to self-determined fulfillment."
- Evaluation did not consist of assessing progress toward learning goals, but of the "learning environment in its ability to facilitate the investigations the students desire and find rewarding" (Hopkins 1979, p. 48).

In contrast to education based almost exclusively on academic excellence, Free Schools shunned formalized teaching. While academic achievement was important, it was generally seen as secondary to individual happiness and valuable only insofar as it helped one achieve the goal of self-fulfillment.

The 1960s were a time of great innovation and movement in the educational system with lasting implications for public school schools with respect to curriculum, delivery and structure. However, most early non-public alternatives had a relatively short lifespan (Raywid, 1981; Young, 1990). Whether this was a result of the struggle to balance the characteristically individualized structure of many of these schools with the formalization necessary for their survival (Deal, 1975), or an indicator suggesting that no one factor could be isolated that would consistently contribute to educational success (Raywid, 1981) is unknown. In any case, this time of experimentation laid the foundation for the present-day alternative movement.

Alternatives of this period, including Freedom Schools and Free Schools, advanced the notion that a singular, inflexible system of education that alienated or excluded major sectors of the population would no longer be tolerated. To this point, Raywid (1994) remarks: "despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments" (p. 26). Another overarching contribution of this early part of the movement was the highlighting of educational choice and the notion that not all students learn best in the same educational context. While these alternatives *outside* of the public education system were seen as among the first alternative options to the traditional system, their emergence inspired a movement of reform *within* the public schools beginning in the latter half of the 1960s.

Alternative Education Within the Public School System

Using characteristics of the alternatives offered outside of public education, educators within the public school system designed their own alternatives to conventional education with the advent of *Open Schools*. These schools were characterized by parent, student and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation; and a child-centered approach. The Murray Road Annex in Massachusetts, The John Adams High School in Oregon, and the St. Paul Open School in Minnesota were among the first open public high schools in America. The existence of the Open Schools greatly influenced the creation of public alternatives at all levels of education, including the following (Young, 1990):

- Schools without Walls – emphasized community-based learning; individuals within the community were brought in to teach students.
- Schools within a School – intended to make large high schools into smaller communities of belonging; individual groups were designed to meet educational needs and interests of students.
- Multicultural Schools – designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.

- Continuation Schools – used as an option for those who were failing in the regular school system because of issues such as dropout, pregnancy, failing grades; these schools were less competitive and more individualized.
- Learning Centers – intended to meet particular student needs by including special resources, such as vocational education, in the school setting.
- Fundamental Schools – emphasized a *back to basics* approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the Free Schools.
- Magnet Schools – developed in response to the need for racial integration; offered a curriculum that emphasized themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds.

Authors such as Barr, Colston, and Parrett (1977), Raywid (1989), and Fantini (1973), wrote extensively about the promise and relevance of alternative options for students within public education, not only as a natural extension of national democracy, but as a necessary tool for renewal within the schools. In the 1970s, the International Consortium on Options in Public Education under the leadership of Robert Barr, Daniel Burke, and Vernon Smith "became a major voice for alternatives and options systems" in the public sector (Raywid, 1981, p. 552). According to Raywid, within their first decade of existence, public alternatives exploded from 100 to more than 10,000.

Through the 1980s, the definition of alternative schools began to narrow in scope. Many of the first open schools did not survive and options seemed to change "from the more progressive and open orientation in the 1970s to a more conservative and remedial one in the 1980s" (Young, 1990 p. 20). In his book, Young attributes the rise of continuation schools and fundamental schools and the apparent decline of innovations, such as open schools, to the conservative climate of the 1980s and to the increasing number of children who were functioning at below-average achievement levels. He notes that, throughout the 1980s, a growing number of alternatives were geared toward students who were disruptive or failing in their home school and that the character and variety of options was greatly shaped by this change. Raywid (1981) supports this account and suggests that during this time, alternative schools became increasingly interested in teaching basics while decreasing their emphasis on collective decision-making (decision-making that included both students and teachers in the process).

It should be noted that magnet schools originated during this same time period as a way to integrate the school system and, as noted above, are sometimes included in the list of educational alternatives within the public school system. However, a comprehensive review of the magnet school literature is beyond the scope of this paper.

Alternative Education Today

Alternative schools and programs have evolved over the years to mean different things to different audiences. However, while succinct, entirely inclusive definitions of current alternative schools and programs are elusive, several characteristics are common among the options currently in existence. Alternative schools are generally described as:

- maintaining a small size (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Morley, 1991; Natriello et al., 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990);
- emphasizing one-on-one interaction between teachers and students (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999);
- creating a supportive environment (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Case, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990);
- allowing opportunities for student success relevant to the students' future (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Natriello et al., 1990); and
- allowing flexibility in structure and emphasis on student decision-making (Barr, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; Natriello et al., 1990).

Though these characteristics are generally agreed upon as present in alternative programs, the emphasis of alternative programs in any particular state or local community may vary. The emphasis may even be different within a state, complicating how the term is used within educational circles. In an effort to capture the various definitions being used in the early 1990's, Raywid (1994) grouped alternatives into three types:

- Type I alternatives are schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.
- Type II alternatives are "last chance" schools where students are sentenced as a last step before expulsion. These are not schools of choice and their emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation.
- Type III alternatives are designed with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues.

Type I programs tend to focus on the match between program and student, not simply on correction of a problem within the student. Raywid notes that alternative schools most often fall into one of these categories, but may also be a mix among the three. As a result of extensive research on alternative programs in Minnesota, Lange & Sletten (1995) proposed that a fourth type, a hybrid, exists that combines school choice, remediation, and innovation to form a "second chance" program that provides another opportunity for success within the educational system following some problem or failure.

For many of the same reasons that static, all-inclusive definitions of alternatives are difficult to supply, a single comprehensive listing of the types of alternative schools is not easily obtained. The constantly evolving nature of alternative programs and the rules that govern them have made them something of a moving target and difficult to describe. With estimates of over 20,000 alternatives currently operating within the public education system, it is difficult to provide a succinct description that would apply across the country. Organizations such as the Alternative Educational Resource Organization (AERO) and the Alternative Network Journal have put considerable effort into compiling or maintaining running lists of existing alternative programs (T. Vatter, personal communication, January, 2001; J. Mintz, personal communication, February 15, 2001). However, the many and varied definitions of alternative programming used across the country (e.g., home-schools, correctional institutions, public and private alternative programs) and the varying degrees of data collection have complicated this effort.

The literature does suggest that states often have a category of service called "alternative" within the state education agency. Though the types of alternatives may vary even within a specific state, there seems to be a central focus that often guides alternative programming within each state. Examples of alternative programs from various states across the country give a glimpse of the variety and scope of the alternative educational options available today.

Michigan

The Michigan Alternative Education Organization web site reports that approximately 369 alternative education programs exist in 270 of the state's more than 700 school districts. These alternatives serve approximately 25,000 students (5 percent of Michigan's secondary education population) and are designed to meet the needs of students at risk. The state has a clear policy of choice for the alternative programs and a goal of maintaining populations in the alternative schools that reflect the racial/ethnic make up of the communities in which they operate (Michigan Alternative Education Association website, http://www.maeo.org).

Minnesota

Currently, there are approximately 150 alternative programs at over 600 sites are in operation in Minnesota. These programs are available by choice and are geared toward helping students who are at risk of not graduating from their regular school. Students, kindergarten through adult, may enroll in the programs, many of which are offered year round. The programs range from public alternative programs and area learning centers (ALCs) to privately contracted alternatives. Among other reasons, students may qualify for the programs if they are performing substantially below level on achievement tests, speak English as a second language, are pregnant or parenting, are chronically truant, or are one year behind their age group in school. Programs maintain a small size and are staffed with teachers who specialize in educating at-risk students (Minnesota Department of Children Families and Learning website, http://cfl.state.mn.us).

New York

The guide to alternatives in the state of New York reports that approximately 100,000 students from the state are in some sort of alternative educational entity (i.e., alternative education programs or detention facilities). Included in this estimation are students with behavioral or academic difficulties, high performing students, newly immigrated students, and students who may be pregnant or parenting (New York State Education Department, 1997).

North Carolina

A 1996 statewide survey of North Carolina's alternative learning programs found 185 programs in existence across the state. Of those programs, the largest percentage existed as separate classrooms within an existing high school (41%) or in a separate school away from the campus (31%). According to the report, the alternatives were developed to meet the needs of students experiencing discipline or behavior problems, attendance issues and academic difficulties in the regular school setting (Brewer, 1998).

Ohio

According to records gathered for this review, there are at least 126 alternative programs throughout the state of Ohio. The programs provide a range of short- and long-term options for students and may include social skills building, health behavior training, career development, GED completion, day suspension, and correctional programming. The programs appear to be almost exclusively designed for students who are having academic difficulty or who have dropped out of their assigned public school (Ohio Department of Education, 2000).

South Carolina

In its 2000 Report, the South Carolina State Board of Education reported that approximately 100 alternative schools existed in the state. The schools have a median size of 35 students and vary by age served, size and hours of operation. Many of the programs are considered "last chance" and the five most utilized instruction formats are self-paced, computer assisted, whole group, traditional and tutorial. Ninth graders make up the largest proportion of students attending South Carolina's alternative programs. The report stated that although nine out of ten schools collected evaluation information on their students and programs, there was little evidence of a formalized evaluation process (Tenenbaum, 2000).

Washington

The State of Washington has over 400 alternative options ranging from Internet schools to schools for incarcerated youth. According to the director of the Washington Association for Learning Alternatives, the state has maintained alternative schools as schools of choice rather than schools of remediation or "last chance" placement. One of the fastest growing alternatives in the state, Parent Partnered Programs, combines home schooling and public education components for students (R. Wiley, personal communication, January, 2001).

Although the scope of this review did not lend itself to extensive research and follow up into the alternatives offered in all fifty states, the sample of states reviewed suggests a wide range of accessibility and programming in alternative schools across the country. The variability in how each state approaches alternative education illustrates the difficulty of using one definition for this educational delivery model. However, the limited review does suggest that current alternative programs are often designed primarily for secondary students who are at risk for school failure. Though programs and schools for elementary students can be found, it appears most are geared for older students.

Essential Elements of Alternative Schools

A great deal of the literature on alternative education and programs for at-risk students focuses on determining "essential" elements of programs that will help these students. The research contains numerous lists of essential elements of alternative schools. Depending on the focus of the research or evaluation, the lists may vary slightly to accommodate the specific needs of dropouts, students with disabilities or other populations. However, commonalties among the lists suggest attributes of most well-run alternatives. Whether these points of best practice are, indeed,

"practice" for most existing alternatives is a matter yet to be thoroughly documented. However, the lists do provide a glimpse of elements many researchers and advocates see as important descriptors of effective alternative schools. A summary of the points made in a few of these lists follows below:

- clearly identified goals to inform both evaluation and enrollment (Gregg, 1999);
- wholehearted implementation without a piecemeal approach to structuring programs (Raywid, 1993);
- autonomy (Gregg, 1999);
- student-centered atmosphere (Frymier, 1987);
- integration of research and practice in areas such as assessment, curriculum, teacher competencies, and integration of special education services (Geurin & Denti, 1999);
- training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations with or without disabilities (Ashcroft, 1999; Krovetz, 1999); and
- links to multiple agencies, an element that may become increasingly important as alternatives are required to serve students with special education needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

Specific Populations in Alternative Schools

Historically, alternatives have served a wide variety of students with varying interests, backgrounds and abilities. As previously noted, however, the movement has grown increasingly specialized in scope in recent decades. The concentration of alternatives for at-risk children and the potential for the marginalization of students who attend the various alternatives have invited comment throughout the history of the movement. Arnove and Strout (1978), for example, warned that alternatives, even by 1974, were increasingly geared toward disadvantaged and disruptive students who were sent there without choice (in the manner of Raywid's Type II programs). A natural trend, they argued, was that there would be alternatives for "good" students and alternatives for "bad" students who challenged educators.

Robert Barr (1981), although very optimistic about the potential of alternatives for educational innovation, cautioned that "at their best, alternative schools have functioned as an exciting laboratory where unique and often daring experiments are conducted and evaluated. At their worst, alternative schools represent some of the most unfortunate tendencies toward social tracking, political manipulation, and educational hucksterism" (p.571). While these issues remain in the perpetual conversation surrounding alternatives (Sagor, 1999), the use of alternatives to help those most disenfranchised from the school system has also garnered support.

The literature includes research on several specific student populations that are expected to benefit from alternative education. The most investigated among these populations are students who have dropped out of their regular schools or who are at risk of dropping out because of failure in a conventional school setting. There has been less examination of the population comprised of students with identified disabilities who access alternative education. To understand the impact of alternative schools on these students, it is important to examine the literature exploring their experiences and reasons for leaving the traditional school system.

Dropouts

The connection between alternative programs and dropout prevention, in its most positive sense, has been made intuitively since early in the alternative school movement.[2] Many students originally served by the Free Schools were alienated from the traditional schools of the time (Deal, 1975). However, major research on effective programs for dropout prevention that linked to characteristics of alternative programs did not begin until the 1980s (Duttweiler, 1995; Dynarski & Wood, 1997; Natriello et al., 1990; Newmann, 1981; Pitman & Haughwout, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989).

An understanding of, and interest in, the predictors and educational trajectory of dropouts has flourished throughout the past two decades. Initiatives such as Goal 2[3] of the National Education Goals (developed in 1990) illustrated the growing national interest in increasing the country's graduation rate and understanding the problems of school dropouts (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1993). The OERI document called for research to identify educational practices and policies that might play a role in school dropout prevention. In particular, the document highlighted the need to understand more about school organizations and student-adult relationships that might bear on a student's decision to leave school. Formative work by the National Dropout Prevention Center (2001) and authors Wehlage et al. (1989), Natriello et al. (1990) and others have helped identify patterns and perspectives on the dropout problem in our country. Most important, perhaps, is the understanding educators have gained about the complexity of dropout predictors and the diverse reasons for students dropping out. Recent education research examines these education issues through a multi-faceted lens, considering elements of home, school and community together to understand outcomes. Wehlage et al. (1989) have explored the diverse characteristics of students who drop out and the many variables that may affect that decision:

> It is essential that educators realize that a wide range of students can become at risk of school failure, that students at risk of dropping out are not necessarily those with the least intellectual ability, and that standard labels for student characteristics do not capture the nature of the interaction between at-risk students and the school (p. 73).

Alternatives are highlighted in the dropout literature because of the presence of several key characteristics commonly associated with alternative schools that "answer" the call for schools to attend to the needs of students at risk. Characteristics such as individualized flexible programs with high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size are considered to be key dropout prevention strategies (Duttweiler, 1995; Marder, 1992; Natriello et al., 1990, Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). For example, the National Dropout Prevention Center identifies the small size, emphasis on caring relationships, and clear rules and expectations of alternative schools as key elements of effective strategies for reaching students at risk of dropping out of school (Duttweiler, 1995; National Dropout Prevention Center web site, 2001). In their discussion of school reform, Wehlage and Rutter (1987) reflect that "evidence

[2] While a substantial base of literature exists on dropout prevention and the attendant issues, a detailed review of that literature is not within the scope of this document.

[3] Goal 2: By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

from case studies of effective alternative programs for marginal students indicates that such students respond positively to an environment that combines a caring relationship and personalized teaching with a high degree of program structure characterized by clear, demanding, but attainable expectations" (p. 86-87).

Key areas where alternative school settings are strongly associated with addressing the needs of students at risk of dropping out are highlighted bellow. These include: academics; relationships at school with teachers and peers; and school size. Though this list does not exhaust the list of characteristics cited in the dropout literature, it gives a sense of the links authors have made between dropout prevention and alternative programs.

Academics

There is strong support in the literature that school failure impacts many students' decisions to leave school (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Natriello et al., 1990; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). In fact, recent research on dropout prevention (Battin-Pearson, et al.,. 2000) suggests that dropout before the 10th grade is most strongly predicted by poor academic achievement. A series of suspensions, missed classes, disciplinary actions and academic failures leave this group of students weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success. In an investigation into the effects of institutional structure on dropout (based on the National Longitudinal Transition High School and Beyond data set), Wehlage and Rutter (1987) conclude the following:

> The picture of high school that emerges for most [dropouts] is a place where teachers are not particularly interested in students, and the discipline system is perceived as neither effective nor fair. Dropouts are not satisfied with their schooling. For the dropout, school is a place where one gets into trouble; suspension, probation, and cutting classes are much more frequent for this group (p. 81).

Their investigation is noteworthy because of the researchers' emphasis on the *interaction* between school and student that results in the student being disenfranchised from the system.

Another facet of this interplay between school environment and student is often referred to as the "fit" between the academic program and the individual (Arnove & Strout, 1980, Hendrick, MacMillan, & Balow, 1989). In a review of the literature, Natriello et al., (1990) suggest that one of the main factors associated with school failure is a mismatch between student skills and interests and the academic program of the school. They suggest that programs, particularly those for at-risk students, should be tailored to fit students' needs and interests. The most recent work of Barr and Parrett (2001) supports this thesis. They recommend that students who are failing be placed in multi-grade level classrooms that emphasize accelerated curriculum for mastery and attention to individual needs. Based on this type of recommendation, findings concerning academic fit and dropout have been used to support the formation and design of alternative schools and programs.

Relationships at School with Teachers and Peers

Throughout the literature on school dropouts there is evidence that a school climate of rejection by teachers or peers has a strongly negative effect on the prospect for students at risk (Natriello et al., 1990, Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). In a review of the literature on school dropouts, Natriello et al. (1990) suggest that poor student-student and student-teacher relationships could play as large a role in students' decisions to leave school as academic failure. They recommend that programs for at-risk students work to strengthen student connections to peers, to adults in school and to the school as an institution. Alternative schools are cited as an example of programs well suited to facilitate these relationships.

Other research findings highlight the teacher's role and suggest that an atmosphere of high teacher expectation and support has a positive effect on the behavior and academic investment and success of at-risk students (Duttweiler, 1995; Sprague, Walker, Nishioka, & Steiber, 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). These relationships also contribute to a sense of school membership—the reciprocal relationship that encourages a student's attachment and commitment to the culture and goals of the school (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Another way of understanding the relationship between peer/teacher connections and educational persistence is to examine the type of students who have dropped out of regular school settings and their level of awareness of relational issues. In a 1988 study, Dona Kagan performed a discriminant analysis on surveys of students in both regular and alternative settings. She found that the students who had dropped out of the regular high school and attended the alternative school were more highly sensitive to social aspects of the school climate such as an atmosphere of "friction or cliqueness" than their counterparts attending a regular high school (Kagan, 1988).

An emphasis on an inviting school climate and individual relationships with teachers is often associated with the mission of alternative schools. This emphasis is based on the theory that a sense of caring will encourage students to persist in their school experience and, together with a sense of academic success, will increase self-esteem (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Factors related to encouraging student success at alternative schools, as investigated by Wehlage et al. (1989), include teacher accountability for student success, extended teacher role, persistence with students and optimism about student potential. Their study of alternative programs led them to conclude that these elements, together with a sense of school ownership and enabling school structures (such as small size, one-on-one relationships, autonomy, flexibility and control), worked together to create "a culture of care and support" (p.147).

School Size

School size may also have an effect on school dropout. Research consistently shows that large school size is an important dimension contributing to student alienation from the educational system (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Newmann, 1981; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). An analysis of the High School and Beyond Study conducted in the 1980s revealed that larger schools had a tendency to have higher dropout rates. The authors conclude that the benefits of bigger schools, in terms of diversity of programs, may not be outweighed by the deleterious effect on dropout rates (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). In other studies and reviews,

small school size is linked to reduction of violence because smaller size allows for higher teacher engagement that may decrease levels of discipline problems (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Small school size is also considered a safeguard for students because of the higher level of student-adult contact, which increases the potential for meeting students' needs and promoting a sense of community (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Natriello et al., 1990; Newmann, 1981).

Small school size is a defining characteristic of most alternative schools and has been associated with promoting social interaction among students and teachers and with reduction in school violence (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Natriello et al., 1990). The small size of alternatives may allow a greater sense of school membership and engagement (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Natriello et al., 1990; Wehlage et al., 1989). For example, in their study of 14 alternative schools, Wehlage et al. (1989) found that students regularly reported that one of the reasons they were willing to participate in their alternative school program was the sense of membership that they felt in the community as a result of the warm, caring environment. Other studies report that students who transferred to alternative programs did so because they had experienced poor relationships or lack of support in their previous school settings (Gorney, 1995; Lehr, 1999). A picture emerges from the literature that suggests links between attendance at alternative programs and reduction of dropout rates for students at risk.

Students with Disabilities

Students who require special education and related services are another specific population thought to benefit from alternative education. Though generally alternative schools are not specifically designed to serve students with disabilities, many students who have been identified as requiring special education or related services attend alternative schools and programs. For example, some students with emotional behavioral issues choose to attend an alternative school or program.

Students with emotional behavioral issues or learning disabilities often struggle in the conventional school system, and they may become disenfranchised and drop out for many of the same reasons as their non-disabled peers (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Office of Special Education Programs, 1994; Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1989). In fact, students with disabilities drop out at a higher rate than those without disabilities. Research in the early 1990s indicated that the dropout rate for students with disabilities was as much as 20 percent higher than for students in the general school population. Among students with disabilities, students with emotional-behavioral disorders were found to be the most likely of students with disabilities to drop out (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989; Marder, 1992).

In 1994, the high dropout rate for students with serious emotional disturbance prompted the release of a National Agenda from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to draw attention to the need for research to address the problem. A review of the data painted a dismal picture for these students. OSEP's recommendations included the promotion of learning environments that "respond to the needs of all students, teach both academic and social skills, and build on each student's strengths and interests" (OSEP, 1994, p.7). Although these recommendations were applied to all educational settings, many alternative programs fit the description by their very nature.

Studies show that a high number of students with disabilities, particularly those identified with learning and social-emotional needs, access alternative schools to help them complete their education (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). One study of Minnesota alternatives found that 19 percent of students enrolled in the programs had some type of disability and over 50 percent of those students were identified as having an emotional behavioral disorder (Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993). There is also evidence that these students may not be labeled as "disabled" once they enter an alternative program or school. This occurs because either they were not assessed for special education services in the alternative setting or they chose not to use their special education label upon entrance into the alternative program (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Gorney, 1995; Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993).

Though no national-level studies were found documenting the effects of alternative schools on students with disabilities, findings from one state shed light on what may be happening for some students. Researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted one of the most in-depth studies of alternative programs and students with disabilities by examining Minnesota's alternative programs. The findings suggest that many of the aspects of alternative programs that may make them appropriate to serve students at risk of dropping out also make them well suited to serve students with disabilities (Lange, 1998). These aspects include small school size and individualized instruction (Gorney, 1995).

A brief review of characteristics of effective programs for students with disabilities shows that the following elements are particularly helpful for these students:

- high standards set and enforced (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yarnoff, 2000; Marder, 1992);
- emphasis on teaching living skills and vocational skills (Butler-Nalin & Padilla, 1989, Marder, 1992);
- counseling or therapy provided (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Marder, 1992);
- relationship with trusted adult (Benz et al., 2000); and
- meaningful educational and transition goals linked to future education or work transition (Benz et al., 2000; Marder, 1992).

Some or all of these characteristics may be present in alternative schools or programs thus providing another educational opportunity for students with disabilities.

Alternatives as a Disciplinary Measure

The types of alternative schools and programs discussed in this review may provide an option for those students placed in an interim alternative educational setting, as defined in 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), due to disciplinary measures. However, alternative schools and programs as discussed in this review are not specifically designed to serve this function. Future research on the extent and implications of the use of alternative schools and programs as interim alternative educational settings is necessary. The section of the IDEA that describes the interim alternative educational setting is included in Appendix A.

Students with High Risk Health Behaviors

One of the major elements that many students bring to the alternative setting is a set of high-risk behaviors. Although not thoroughly investigated for this synthesis, the health behaviors of students who attend alternative schools are a present and growing concern. In a nationwide survey of the risk behaviors of students attending alternative schools, Grunbaum, Kann, Kinchen & Ross (2000) found that a large proportion of these students placed themselves at serious risk by participating in behaviors such as unprotected sex, drunk driving, drug use, suicide attempts and weapon use at a significantly higher rate than students in conventional high schools. These findings are substantiated in many other smaller studies (Fulkerson, Harrison, & Beebe, 1997, May & Copeland, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 1999; Weller et al., 1999). For example, May and Copeland's 1998 study revealed an alternative population that was more likely than conventional high school students to use avoidant coping strategies such as drinking and using drugs. Alternative school students responding to the 1996 Minnesota Student Survey (1996) reported suicide attempts twice as often as students in conventional high school settings. Students in alternative programs also reported a higher rate of sexual activity at an earlier age than their counterparts in traditional high schools. These findings are supported in research conducted around the nation. In Texas, results from a study of risk behaviors among alternative students (Weller et al., 1999) show a "substantial percentage of alternative school students in this sample participated in behaviors that placed them at risk for violence-related injury, suicide, unintended pregnancy, and the chronic diseases that result from tobacco and substance use" (p.26), with variance for subgroups by age and ethnicity.

The interrelationship of academic and physical health, and the pressing issue presented by failure in these two areas, was most recently highlighted in the findings of Blum, Beuhring, and Rinehart (2000). Using data from a national study of approximately 90,000 students at 134 schools across the United States, the authors found that "being at academic risk was nearly universally associated with every health risk behavior we studied. We need to understand that health and education are closely intertwined and that school failure needs to be viewed as a health as well as an education crisis" (p. 37).

Outcomes for Students in Alternative Schools and Programs[4]

The innovations that alternatives inspired in the earliest stages of the movement made them a natural place for research and evaluation, particularly in the 1970s (Barr & Parrett, 2001;Young, 1990). However, many scholars in the field have noted that, as a whole, these early evaluations did not hold the rigor necessary to inspire confidence in the conclusions (Natriello et al., 1990; Raywid, 1981; Young, 1990). Given the great variation in alternative programs, evaluations that included multiple settings were extremely rare. More rare, even among present-day evaluations, are those with results on program effectiveness that can be extended beyond single alternatives or categorized in a way that places them in the context of alternatives as a whole. Often, evaluation results are not widely disseminated or organized for application to a range of

[4] Most alternative schools selected for research cited in this section and throughout the paper were schools of choice. However, any further interpretation of the results should be accompanied by a review of the specific studies and schools involved.

alternatives (Raywid, 1981). Other criticisms of research on alternative programs point out that many studies report on short-term outcomes for the programs, neglecting more long-term results, and that program evaluators may often be too closely linked to the school to give objective interpretations (Carruthers et al., 1999).

As the public alternative school movement has matured into its fourth decade of existence, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have increasingly demanded higher quality research that takes larger strides toward understanding and evaluating alternative schools and the students who attend them. For example, after an extensive review of the literature on educating disadvantaged children, Natriello et al. (1990) concluded that systematic information must be gathered that links educational programs for disadvantaged students, such as alternative schools, with outcomes for those students. Natriello et al. also call for research that examines the character of programs designed to help enhance student performance. Similarly, Barr and Parrett (2001) reflect on the trend toward research based on the "bottom line" for programs. The educational community has become less interested, they say, in simply knowing that reforms are being implemented. Rather, audiences want to know what effect these programs have on student achievement and retention.

Despite limitations in the research on alternative schools, the available findings lead to some general conclusions about outcomes for students in these schools. Specifically, research has been conducted in three areas: 1) student response to choice and flexibility, 2) students' sense of belonging, satisfaction and changes in self-esteem, and 3) academic achievement. Each of these areas provides a snapshot of the outcomes for students in alternative settings. A few state-specific studies and program evaluations that cover alternatives in more than one state highlight these conclusions. Findings from these studies are summarized below.

Choice and School Flexibility

In a landmark study of the effects of alternative programs on at-risk students in Michigan, Gold and Mann (1984) found that students in the alternative programs reported fewer disruptive behaviors by the end of the study compared to the students in traditional school settings. Students reported that flexibility was a key difference between their experience in the alternative and traditional settings. The authors report that as students grew more comfortable and confident in their educational settings, their academic performance and commitment to their role as students improved. Because the study was conducted with students in a short-term alternative setting, the authors were able to ascertain whether this sense of confidence and academic improvement carried over when the students returned to their traditional school settings. Their findings suggest, for a group of students with particular characteristics (including higher self esteem, lower reports of depressed and anxious feelings, and fewer somatic complaints at the outset of the study relative to the other group of alternative students), the improvements did continue in the traditional setting. However, there was no carryover of effect for a group of "beset" students in the sample. Those students were extremely depressed and anxious upon entering the alternative program and, for them, the positive effect of the alternative setting was lost upon their return to the traditional setting.

In another state-level study of alternatives, students reported choice and flexibility as central to their decisions to attend the alternative programs and in their persistence at the programs (Lange & Lehr, 1997; Lehr & Lange, 2000). These students attended alternative schools where nearly all students enrolled by choice rather than being assigned to the school due to behavior or other issues.

Sense of Belonging, Satisfaction and Student Self-Esteem

Students' sense of belonging, satisfaction and self-esteem are frequently examined together in alternative school studies because of the similarity among the characteristics and their importance for the success of students who are alienated from the educational system. For the purpose of this review, findings in these areas are reported together.

In general, student reports of their experience at alternatives have been overwhelmingly positive. School size, flexibility, and teacher relationships characterized by care and concern have all been reported as reasons for high levels of student satisfaction (Griffin, 1993; Smith, Gregory, & Pugh, 1981). The studies by Lange and Lehr (1997) and Gold and Mann (1984) highlight the success of alternatives in meeting students' needs for positive peer and student relationships. Students in the Gold and Mann study reported more personal contacts with peers and teachers than their counterparts in traditional high schools. Likewise, Lange and Lehr found that students reported more positive relationships with teachers than at-risk students in comparison high schools. Similarly, May and Copeland, in a 1998 study of students in three mid-western alternative programs, found that academic engagement and positive relationships in the program were among the top reasons students gave for their attendance at the alternative school.

In one of the earlier studies of alternative programs, Strathe and Hash (1979) found that a sample of students from an alternative program showed a significant change in self-esteem over time. The finding was true for the junior-high aged students in the sample (mean age 15.0 years), but not for those who were identified as secondary level students (mean age 16.5 years). Since then, multiple studies highlighting the effects of alternatives on self-esteem have emerged. For example, Smith et al. (1981) studied students in seven alternative schools and six conventional schools to measure the effects of the alternative programs. Students and teachers at the alternative schools reported a much higher level of satisfaction and self-esteem than their counterparts. Dugger and Dugger (1998) found similar results in an evaluation of an alternative program in Illinois. In an investigation of short-term alternative schools in the Midwest, Nichols and Steffy (1997) used a self-report questionnaire to determine whether students experienced a change in their self-esteem as a result of attending the alternative school. They found that students who completed the program showed a significant increase in self-regulation, school self-esteem, and peer self-esteem.

Academic Outcomes

Studies documenting academic outcomes for students attending alternative schools have often indicated mixed results. A review of available studies examining academic outcomes showed little or no change or a decline on standardized tests over the course of a school year (Carruthers & Baenen, 1997; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Lange & Lehr, 1999a; Tenenbaum, 2000). An

extensive evaluation of alternatives in North Carolina reported a negative academic result for students who returned to the conventional setting after attending alternative schools for a short period of time (Carruthers & Baenen, 1997). The mediocre to poor results of evaluations have led some researchers to posit that student attitudes during testing may have a strong negative effect when students feel little investment in the outcome (Dugger & Dugger, 1998). Others have noted the limitation of short-term evaluations with an at-risk population that may need time to adjust and make academic gains (Lange & Lehr, 1999a).

The inconsistency of academic gains made by students in alternative settings is illustrated in the findings of a large-scale evaluation study done by Mathematica (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). This study, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, examined a variety of dropout-prevention programs across the country, many of which were considered alternative programs. Among the more than 20 programs evaluated were GED completion programs, alternative schools and whole-school restructuring programs. Nine of the 21 schools were either schools within schools or alternative schools. Students at these schools reported that they worked hardest to succeed when they felt teachers "pushed" them to learn while showing that they cared for the students. At the middle school level, the alternative schools and schools within schools were effective for dropout prevention and academic progress. When researchers compared these students with other, similar, middle school students who were not in the program, they report that students in the alternative programs were much less likely to drop out and were promoted an average of half a grade more than the other students. However, these programs did not noticeably impact attendance or academic scores as defined by course grades and locally administered achievement tests. For the most part, the alternative high schools in the study did not have a great deal of success reducing dropout rates. However, one alternative high school studied, which was based on a community college campus, was successful in reducing dropout rates for students at high risk of dropping out and in helping those students at lower risk of dropping out to receive a high school diploma. The authors note that this school was most likely successful because it enrolled students who were highly motivated to graduate with a diploma.

In another Mathematica study, this one funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Dynarski and Wood (1997) evaluated the outcomes for three alternative high school programs designed specifically to help at-risk students earn a high school diploma. These schools maintained small class size and emphasized positive attention from teachers. They were also described as teaching the standard curricula while adjusting the course work to help students accumulate credits flexibly. Again, the results were mixed. After two years, one of the sites had successfully increased attendance and credits earned. After four years, the students at that site were significantly more likely to have graduated than their counterparts who had not been admitted to the program. Students at the second site showed none of these gains, however, and their standardized test scores showed significantly less mastery in reading and math than scores for the students who were not admitted to the program. Data from the third site were more limited. The results presented showed a moderate change in dropout rates for students attending the alternative program. The authors also note that, although these programs were expressly designed to increase the number of students graduating with a high school diploma, students at the alternatives earned more GED certificates than regular high school diplomas.

Student Characteristics and Positive Outcomes

It is noteworthy that results from at least two of the studies reported above varied for students depending upon their characteristics. In the studies by Lange and Lehr (1997, 1999a) and Gold and Mann (1984) described below, students were found to have specific characteristics that appeared to impact their outcomes.

In the Minnesota study (Lange & Lehr, 1999a), students were identified as "persisters" and "dropouts" after one year of observation and study. Those students labeled as persisters missed less than thirty days of school during the year of the study. Those labeled as dropouts had missed more than thirty days or had left the program entirely. When entrance survey and assessment results were reviewed, it was found that persisters were rated as having a higher level of classroom participation, completion of tasks and perseverance to goals than those students who eventually dropped out of the program. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of academic achievement when entrance academic assessments were reviewed. Persisters in the study were also more likely to have higher ratings for school and social engagement. The researchers suggest that these findings may provide information that would allow potential dropouts from an alternative program to be identified through initial screening, so that early interventions could be provided to assist in their success.

In the Gold and Mann study (1984), the two groups of students were labeled "buoyant" and "beset." The beset students were more anxious and depressed upon entry into the program. These students described themselves as getting into more fights in their regular school setting and reported lower self-esteem. There was no difference in academic scores between buoyant and beset students upon entry into the program. While both types of students showed great gains in optimism about their academic success during their alternative school experience, upon re-entry into the non-alternative setting, only buoyant students remained significantly more optimistic than their non-alternative counterparts. This finding was true for the students' attitude toward school and their commitment to the role of student.

These findings are of interest because they reveal, again, the assertion of Wehlage et al. (1989) that there is great diversity in the group of students labeled "at risk." In a discussion of their findings concerning dropout prevention programs, Dynarski and Gleason (1998) made a similar argument but with a slightly different focus. They found that the students labeled at risk in their programs also had many offsetting factors such as high academic achievement and high expectations for their future. This led them to posit that programs serving students at risk of dropping out based on a limited set of risk factors may not have a thorough understanding of the needs of those students. These more incidental findings that have accompanied research and evaluation reports in the alternative school literature may provide important insight into the variety of students who attend alternative schools and programs.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As the review of the literature illustrates, alternative schools and programs have evolved over the past four decades. What began as a means to ensure appropriate education for students receiving substandard services has evolved to a group of programs or schools that provides an educational option for students disenfranchised from the traditional educational system. Sometimes these

students are placed in the alternative programs, other times they have the opportunity to enroll in alternative programs by choice. States or local school districts usually determine the parameters. While alternatives began in the non-public educational arena, at this time they are most often found in the public school system.

Though alternatives have been in existence for decades and serve an increasingly large portion of America's school children, there is little evidence that alternative schools have been studied on a national basis. With few exceptions, alternative schools have most often been examined in state-specific studies that generally investigate only a few schools or programs. Often information about alternatives is embedded in literature on other research areas such as dropout prevention, the education of at-risk students, or school choice. The current state of the knowledge base about alternative schools has implications for policy, practice and future research.

The Definitions

Though alternatives appear to be a popular form of educational delivery, they differ in their definition and application across the nation, thus making generalizations difficult. The term "alternative school or program" is used generically, but is operationalized quite differently depending upon the state definition. This lack of uniformity created by the very origin of the alternative movement, complicates national examination of the practice and effectiveness of alternative schools and programs. The characteristics of specific alternative programs make it challenging to generalize their effectiveness. Some examples of these characteristics are as follows:

- enrollment by choice versus school-determined placement;
- focus on dropout prevention versus broader efforts to re-engage students who are disenfranchised from the traditional system; and
- long-term versus short-term enrollment.

The current variability in definition creates a hole in our understanding of an important and apparently well-used model of education and limits our ability to assess the present state and future potential of the option.

The research and literature that does attempt to define alternative schools (e.g., Raywid's three alternative types) may provide a valuable framework for understanding alternatives. However, this is essentially only guesswork until a definitive survey is conducted of alternatives as they currently exist and operate across the nation. The need to document some basic facts about the characteristics of alternative programs nationally and how these characteristics differ depending upon state laws and regulations is apparent. The research need is for a clear, precise delineation of the types of programs and services available across the nation so the important task of determining their effectiveness can begin.

Student Characteristics

The literature suggests that present-day alternatives are typically serving students who are at risk for school failure or are disenfranchised from the traditional school system. Again, this

suggestion is limited by the lack of a succinct national portrait of alternative programs and the students who attend. A clear picture of the characteristics of the students as they relate to the programs is also important in order to examine program effectiveness both individually and nationally. It is unclear, at this point, which students are benefiting the most from the alternative system. Some of the research reviewed notes the differences between students who persist and those who drop out of alternative programs (Lange & Lehr, 1999a). Other research highlights the differences between students' characteristics upon entry into the programs and documents the variance in outcomes for these students (Gold & Mann, 1984). Still other research suggests that the risk factors used to assign children to alternative programs may not accurately present the various needs they bring to the setting (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

While these studies most often report the findings as ancillary to another research question, they reveal a need for an understanding of the characteristics of students who attend alternative programs. Other research may investigate questions such as: Does it make a difference in school success if students attend the alternative by choice or by placement? Are there student characteristics that enhance success at the alternative program, and if so, what are they? Are there disproportionate numbers of students of color or low-income students attending alternative schools? What are the roles of screening and identification of individual intervention strategies in alternative settings? What role does the presence of students with disabilities have on climate and practice in alternative schools? Do students enroll in these programs to avoid being labeled as "disabled" and thus provided special education services? Though the literature touched on each of these areas, there has not been enough research to understand the role student characteristics and alternative characteristics play in student success.

Based on the limited research findings available on younger students, it appears that most alternative programs were designed for older secondary students. However, it is not clear whether this is truly the case, or if there are just few studies examining younger students. The scattered nature of the alternative literature also makes it difficult to determine if all possibilities for review have been exhausted. It is possible that studies examining younger students attending alternative schools or programs are reported in a literature base not tapped for this research synthesis.

The presence of high levels of risk behaviors among students in alternative settings also demands further investigation. The implications of the behaviors for academic success and school retention are matched by the threat they pose to the health and livelihood of the students themselves. The reportedly high concentration of students participating in these behaviors also imposes demands on alternative schools. It is important to consider how schools and programs define success for the students with the most high-risk behaviors and how that success translates to conventional outcome reporting. Future research should build on the recent literature findings to provide a national picture of health behaviors of alternative school participants. A clear picture in this area will aid in the description of alternative programs, the students they serve, and the challenges they face to help these students succeed against the odds.

Measuring Effectiveness

As the research delineated in the body of the review indicates, the academic outcomes for students attending alternative programs are mixed and the research documenting those outcomes is varied in scope and method. In order to fully examine the effect of alternative schools on student achievement and retention in alternative schools, more large-scale, standardized assessments may be necessary. The initial quest for any large-scale review of the effectiveness of alternative schools and programs is to define effectiveness. The literature lists several characteristics of "effective" alternative schools; yet, there is little empirical evidence that the characteristics consistently transfer to desired outcomes for students.

Policymakers and practitioners, alike, must determine the desired outcomes for students enrolled in alternative schools or programs and whether these differ from desired outcomes for students in traditional programs. Many, if not most, students enrolled in alternative programs, as defined in this review, have difficulty in the traditional school environment. Many have dropped out of school or contemplated such an action. Some have been placed in alternatives due to extreme behaviors unacceptable in the traditional school and others are special education students who have violated discipline rules. The larger question for many in the alternative school movement is whether the desired outcomes for these students can be focused narrowly on academic outcomes or whether a broader measure of effectiveness is needed. For example, is keeping the students in an educational program, in and of itself, a measure of effectiveness? Is the students' demonstration of appropriate school behaviors a measure of effectiveness? Is successful return to the traditional school program a measure of effectiveness?

The variability of what defines an alternative program and the characteristics of students who attend the programs may require malleability in the evaluation process that distinguishes it from evaluation in a traditional educational setting. For example the current emphasis on academic outcomes places many alternative programs in a precarious situation. While the *ultimate* outcome for any educational entity is to increase student achievement, these programs and schools may need to begin their assessment of effectiveness in areas other than academics and *then* move to a more typical approach to evaluation. To ignore nontraditional outcomes for alternative students may negate the positive outcomes that have emerged in the areas of increased satisfaction, self-esteem and connection to school – those outcomes that may ultimately keep students in school.

In addition to attending to non-academic outcomes, because of the nature of the students who access alternative programs, it may be necessary to track outcomes for these students over a much longer period of time. These suggestions for evaluation that diverge from traditional efficacy studies are an attempt to find ways to measure the effectiveness of programs that serve students who might otherwise not be attending school at all. It may be that alternative means of education for this population will require alternative means of evaluation. The key, it seems, from this review of the literature is to find a way to capture the process in a way that is meaningful to the wider educational and political audience.

Stigma of Alternative Schools

Though measuring effectiveness may mean embracing a wider definition of success within alternative education, there are still issues that arise from the possibility of holding a different standard for these schools. Arnove and Strout (1980), in a review of the research, suggest that there may be a stigma attached to students who attend alternative schools (because it may be assumed that they are offered a lower level of education) and that this may hamper the success of the students who attend. As with most areas of life, students need to feel that the school they are working in and graduating from provides them with the necessary academic experience and prestige. Leone & Drakeford (1999) explain that "alternative education needs to become a meaningful alternative to traditional, contemporary public schooling...quality alternative programs should have many of the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in more traditional settings" (p.87). Alternative programs may require evaluation based on a broader array of outcomes, but they also require academic integrity or students may be stigmatized in the outside world. It may be difficult to reconcile these seemingly conflicting needs. However, the presence of rigorous evaluation and a clearer definition of alternative schools and programs may help to elevate their role among educational options.

Special Education Issues

There are several issues to consider in the area of special education and alternative schools and programs. Some studies suggest that students with disabilities exit special education upon entering the alternative program. At this point there is not enough empirical evidence to determine whether this is the case; however, the suggestion raises questions for both traditional schools and alternatives. For example: Why are students choosing to exit special education? Does exit imply dissatisfaction with the special education service delivery model or are there other reasons for exit? Are students with disabilities exiting on their own volition or are programs encouraging students to exit?

There are also issues related to level of service and how alternative schools are able to meet the needs of students who require high levels of special education programming. Since there has been little research in this area, the extent to which students with disabilities receive appropriate services in these settings is unknown. Findings from the Minnesota study (Lange, 1998) suggest there is not one single form of special education service within alternatives. Yet, some students with disabilities report increased satisfaction with the services. The special education service delivery model within alternative schools should be studied to examine not only placement issues, but also its effectiveness and whether there are innovative practices that may be generalized to the traditional secondary school. Further, it is important to determine if special education in the traditional secondary school setting contributes to students' decisions to move to alternative schools and programs or dropout of school entirely.

Other critical issues that have gone largely unrecorded pertain to the effects of the discipline sections of the 1997 amendments to the IDEA. How have these amendments affected students attending alternative programs and the programs' ability to serve students? What is the role of

alternative schools and programs in regard to disciplinary placements? These issues are of great concern and interest to educators and policymakers alike.

Conclusions

Alternative schools have evolved from a promise made within the American educational system—the promise to educate all students, no matter their circumstances or educational issues. Since the beginning, alternatives have been difficult to describe in philosophy and practice, and the challenge only grows as alternatives expand across the nation. Those who have watched and supported the movement realize its potential to provide a caring, nurturing, hopeful environment for the success of the many at-risk children. Dramatic stories are told of students who were on the verge of completely dropping out of school and then found the setting and relationships at alternative schools that allowed them to experience success. As time has progressed, the descriptions of individual programs and discussions of theoretical implications of alternative settings have been necessarily scrutinized for concrete evidence of effectiveness. In order for alternatives to find a place within the educational system, it is necessary that educators, policymakers and researchers base their judgments on more than anecdote and theory. While research on alternative education does exist, it does not adequately address the many questions that remain. Issues of program character, student description, special education service, and academic outcomes are all in need of systematic, ongoing research. And so, it seems the stage is set for a wave of research addressing the nature, scope, and practice of alternative schools and programs across the nation.

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Appendix A
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Sec. 615

Procedural Safeguards

(k) Placement in alternative educational setting

(1) AUTHORITY OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL-

(A) School personnel under this section may order a change in the placement of a child with a disability --

(i) to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting, another setting, or suspension, for not more than 10 school days (to the extent such alternatives would be applied to children without disabilities); and

(ii) to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting for the same amount of time that a child without a disability would be subject to discipline, but for not more than 45 days if --

(I) the child carries a weapon to school or to a school function under the jurisdiction of a State or a local educational agency; or

(II) the child knowingly possesses or uses illegal drugs or sells or solicits the sale of a controlled substance while at school or a school function under the jurisdiction of a State or local educational agency.

(B) Either before or not later than 10 days after taking a disciplinary action described in subparagraph (A) --

(i) if the local educational agency did not conduct a functional behavioral assessment and implement a behavioral intervention plan for such child before the behavior that resulted in the suspension described in subparagraph (A), the agency shall convene an IEP meeting to develop an assessment plan to address that behavior; or

(ii) if the child already has a behavioral intervention plan, the IEP Team shall review the plan and modify it, as necessary, to address the behavior.

(2) AUTHORITY OF HEARING OFFICER- A hearing officer under this section may order a change in the placement of a child with a disability to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting for not more than 45 days if the hearing officer --

(A) determines that the public agency has demonstrated by substantial evidence that maintaining the current placement of such child is substantially likely to result in injury to the child or to others;

(B) considers the appropriateness of the child's current placement;

(C) considers whether the public agency has made reasonable efforts to minimize the risk of harm in the child's current placement, including the use of supplementary aids and services; and

(D) determines that the interim alternative educational setting meets the requirements of paragraph (3)(B).

(3) DETERMINATION OF SETTING-

(A) IN GENERAL- The alternative educational setting described in paragraph (1)(A)(ii) shall be determined by the IEP Team.

(B) ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS- Any interim alternative educational setting in which a child is placed under paragraph (1) or (2) shall --

(i) be selected so as to enable the child to continue to participate in the general curriculum, although in another setting, and to continue to receive those services and modifications, including those described in the child's current IEP, that will enable the child to meet the goals set out in that IEP; and

(ii) include services and modifications designed to address the behavior described in paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) so that it does not recur.

(4) MANIFESTATION DETERMINATION REVIEW-

(A) IN GENERAL- If a disciplinary action is contemplated as described in paragraph (1) or paragraph (2) for a behavior of a child with a disability described in either of those paragraphs, or if a disciplinary action involving a change of placement for more than 10 days is contemplated for a child with a disability who has engaged in other behavior that violated any rule or code of conduct of the local educational agency that applies to all children --

(i) not later than the date on which the decision to take that action is made, the parents shall be notified of that decision and of all procedural safeguards accorded under this section; and

(ii) immediately, if possible, but in no case later than 10 school days after the date on which the decision to take that action is made, a review shall be conducted of the relationship between the child's disability and the behavior subject to the disciplinary action.

(B) INDIVIDUALS TO CARRY OUT REVIEW- A review described in subparagraph (A) shall be conducted by the IEP Team and other qualified personnel.

(C) CONDUCT OF REVIEW- In carrying out a review described in subparagraph (A), the IEP Team may determine that the behavior of the child was not a manifestation of such child's disability only if the IEP Team --

(i) first considers, in terms of the behavior subject to disciplinary action, all relevant information, including --

(I) evaluation and diagnostic results, including such results or other relevant information supplied by the parents of the child;

(II) observations of the child; and

(III) the child's IEP and placement; and

(ii) then determines that --

(I) in relationship to the behavior subject to disciplinary action, the child's IEP and placement were appropriate and the special education services, supplementary aids and services, and behavior intervention strategies were provided consistent with the child's IEP and placement;

(II) the child's disability did not impair the ability of the child to understand the impact and consequences of the behavior subject to disciplinary action; and

(III) the child's disability did not impair the ability of the child to control the behavior subject to disciplinary action.

(5) DETERMINATION THAT BEHAVIOR WAS NOT MANIFESTATION OF DISABILITY-

(A) IN GENERAL- If the result of the review described in paragraph (4) is a determination, consistent with paragraph (4)(C), that the behavior of the child with a disability was not a manifestation of the child's disability, the relevant disciplinary procedures applicable to children without disabilities may be applied to the child in the same manner in which they would be applied to children without disabilities, except as provided in section 612(a)(1).

(B) ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENT- If the public agency initiates disciplinary procedures applicable to all children, the agency shall ensure that the special education and disciplinary records of the child with a disability are transmitted for consideration by the person or persons making the final determination regarding the disciplinary action.

(6) PARENT APPEAL-

(A) IN GENERAL-

(i) If the child's parent disagrees with a determination that the child's behavior was not a manifestation of the child's disability or with any decision regarding placement, the parent may request a hearing.

(ii) The State or local educational agency shall arrange for an expedited hearing in any case described in this subsection when requested by a parent.

(B) REVIEW OF DECISION-

(i) In reviewing a decision with respect to the manifestation determination, the hearing officer shall determine whether the public agency has demonstrated that the child's behavior was not a manifestation of such child's disability consistent with the requirements of paragraph (4)(C).

(ii) In reviewing a decision under paragraph (1)(A)(ii) to place the child in an interim alternative educational setting, the hearing officer shall apply the standards set out in paragraph (2).

(7) PLACEMENT DURING APPEALS-

(A) IN GENERAL- When a parent requests a hearing regarding a disciplinary action described in paragraph (1)(A)(ii) or paragraph (2) to challenge the interim alternative educational setting or the manifestation determination, the child shall remain in the interim alternative educational setting pending the decision of the hearing officer or until the expiration of the time period provided for in paragraph (1)(A)(ii) or paragraph (2), whichever occurs first, unless the parent and the State or local educational agency agree otherwise.

(B) CURRENT PLACEMENT- If a child is placed in an interim alternative educational setting pursuant to paragraph (1)(A)(ii) or paragraph (2) and school personnel propose to change the child's placement after expiration of the interim alternative placement, during the pendency of any proceeding to challenge the proposed change in placement, the child shall remain in the current placement (the child's placement prior to the interim alternative educational setting), except as provided in subparagraph (C).

(C) EXPEDITED HEARING-

(i) If school personnel maintain that it is dangerous for the child to be in the current placement (placement prior to removal to the interim alternative education setting) during the pendency of the due process proceedings, the local educational agency may request an expedited hearing.

(ii) In determining whether the child may be placed in the alternative educational setting or in another appropriate placement ordered by the hearing officer, the hearing officer shall apply the standards set out in paragraph (2).

(8) PROTECTIONS FOR CHILDREN NOT YET ELIGIBLE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES-

(A) IN GENERAL- A child who has not been determined to be eligible for special education and related services under this part and who has engaged in behavior that violated any rule or code of conduct of the local educational agency, including any behavior described in paragraph (1), may assert any of the protections provided for in this part if the local educational agency had knowledge (as determined in accordance with this paragraph) that the child was a child with a disability before the behavior that precipitated the disciplinary action occurred.

(B) BASIS OF KNOWLEDGE- A local educational agency shall be deemed to have knowledge that a child is a child with a disability if --

(i) the parent of the child has expressed concern in writing (unless the parent is illiterate or has a disability that prevents compliance with the requirements contained in this clause) to personnel of the appropriate educational agency that the child is in need of special education and related services;

(ii) the behavior or performance of the child demonstrates the need for such services;

(iii) the parent of the child has requested an evaluation of the child pursuant to section 614; or

(iv) the teacher of the child, or other personnel of the local educational agency, has expressed concern about the behavior or performance of the child to the director of special education of such agency or to other personnel of the agency.

(C) CONDITIONS THAT APPLY IF NO BASIS OF KNOWLEDGE-

(i) IN GENERAL- If a local educational agency does not have knowledge that a child is a child with a disability (in accordance with subparagraph (B)) prior to taking disciplinary measures against the child, the child may be subjected to the same disciplinary measures as measures applied to children without disabilities who engaged in comparable behaviors consistent with clause (ii).

(ii) LIMITATIONS- If a request is made for an evaluation of a child during the time period in which the child is subjected to disciplinary measures under paragraph (1) or (2), the evaluation shall be conducted in an expedited manner. If the child is determined to be a child with a disability, taking into consideration information from the evaluation conducted by the agency and information provided by the parents, the agency shall provide special education and related services in accordance with the provisions of this part, except that, pending the results of the evaluation, the child shall remain in the educational placement determined by school authorities.

(9) REFERRAL TO AND ACTION BY LAW ENFORCEMENT AND JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES-

(A) Nothing in this part shall be construed to prohibit an agency from reporting a crime committed by a child with a disability to appropriate authorities or to prevent State law enforcement and judicial authorities from exercising their responsibilities with regard to the application of Federal and State law to crimes committed by a child with a disability.

(B) An agency reporting a crime committed by a child with a disability shall ensure that copies of the special education and disciplinary records of the child are transmitted for consideration by the appropriate authorities to whom it reports the crime.

(10) DEFINITIONS- For purposes of this subsection, the following definitions apply:

(A) CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE- The term 'controlled substance' means a drug or other substance identified under schedules I, II, III, IV, or V in section 202(c) of the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 812(c)).

(B) ILLEGAL DRUG- The term 'illegal drug' --

(i) means a controlled substance; but

(ii) does not include such a substance that is legally possessed or used under the supervision of a licensed health-care professional or that is legally possessed or used under any other authority under that Act or under any other provision of Federal law.

(C) SUBSTANTIAL EVIDENCE- The term 'substantial evidence' means beyond a preponderance of the evidence.

(D) WEAPON- The term 'weapon' has the meaning given the term 'dangerous weapon' under paragraph (2) of the first subsection (g) of section 930 of title 18, United States Code.

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